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ABSTRACT

The study described in this paper was conducted to examine mentoring from the mentor teachers' perspective and describe what it means to be a teacher leader in a profession long characterized as egalitarian. Three paths are followed in an effort to understand the mentor's perspective: (1) the current vacuum in instructional leadership; (2) the social realities of schools that have encouraged teacher egalitarianism; and (3) the intersection where the innovation of mentor teacher programs meets teacher egalitarianism. Participants in the study (N=17) were first, second, and third year mentors who responded to in-depth interviews. Results suggest that mentoring occurred on three levels: (1) strongly assertive, in which mentors imparted expertise, interacting with teachers in classrooms intensively enough to bring about change; (2) moderately assertive, in which mentors led workshops and other out-of-classroom activities; and (3) weakly assertive, in which mentors wrote curriculum and maintained a co-equal facilitating stance. Two-thirds of the mentors exerted only a moderate or weak assertiveness, unwilling or unable to enter colleagues' classrooms. The fact that mentors find the mantle of leadership confusing, uncomfortable, even painful, implies that if mentor teachers are to bring about educational reform, structural changes giving them specific time and authority to interact with teachers in classrooms need to be made. (LL)

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THE MANTLE OF A MENTOR:

THE MENTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Berkeley, Ca.

Presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1992.

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THE MANTLE OF A MENTOR

by

Dorothy Lemberger

ABSTRACT

This is a study of mentoring from the mentor teachers' perspective. Mentors are needed to fill the existing vacuum of instructional leadership, and to train new teachers in California. Cellularly structured schools and traditions of teacher privacy, equality and autonomy inhibit teacher interaction and create obstacles to mentoring.

The study, included 17 first, second and third year mentors, and used in-depth interviews and documents as data sources. The researcher, a veteran teacher in the district, was also the mentor coordinator.

Mentoring occurred on three levels: strongly assertive, in which mentors imparted expertise, interacting with teachers in classrooms intensively enough to bring about change; moderately assertive, in which mentors led workshops and other out-of classroom activities; and weakly assertive, in which mentors wrote curriculum and maintained a co-equal facilitating stance.

Two-thirds of the mentors exerted only moderate or weak

assertiveness, unwilling or unable to enter colleagues' classrooms. They blamed their failures on their own lack of skill or courage, or on teachers' intransigence. This study implies that if mentor teachers are to bring about educational reform, structural changes giving mentors specific time and authority to interact with teachers in classrooms need to be made.

THE MANTLE OF A MENTOR:
The Mentor's Perspective

by Dorothy Lemberger, Ed.D.

What does it mean to be a mentor teacher, a teacher leader, in a profession long characterized as egalitarian? Teachers rarely see each other teach, or discuss their common professional problems together. But in spite of this isolation, reseachers have long characterized teachers as egalitarian (Lortie, 1975; Lieberman, Saxl, & Miles, 1989). Leadership entails not only the perquisites of title and reward, but implies influencing others. If teachers see themselves and their colleagues as equals, how is it possible for teacher leaders to effectively exercise authority while maintaining their egalitarian stance?

The answer to this puzzle should be of interest to policymakers, who see mentors as mechanisms for instructional improvement, and to future mentors and teacher leaders, who must implement policymakers' intentions. In pursuit of the answer to this conundrum, I interviewed 17 mentor teachers and examined the paper trails that documented their mentorships during the school year 1989-1990 in a mid-sized California district. I have been a teacher in this district for 23 years and served as the district Mentor Teacher Coordinator from 1986 to 1990.

My study revealed that the mentors experienced considerable unease and conflict. Their statements illustrate how precariously the mantle of leadership teeters on mentors' unaccustomed shoulders.

> It's hard for me to see myself as a teacher leader because that sort of smacks of elitism to me and I worry

about that. Part of me doesn't feel comfortable with the idea of levels of people. It's a real sensitive issue. It seems to me that in applying for a mentorship, you commit yourself to a certain degree of expertise, which you then want to share with people. That doesn't feel like leading--but sharing feels good. (Jenny, 1st year mentor)

Mentoring makes people nervous!! I don't know why. Maybe it's because teachers are basically very democratic souls. Being a mentor feels slightly hierachical to me. Besides, I don't like the title, "Mentor." It's too bad they chose that name because they wrecked that word for me. (Marlene, 3rd year mentor)

Jenny pinpoints the mentors' reluctance to take on an authoritative posture with their colleagues, while Marlene in describing teachers as "democratic" refers to what researchers would call teacher egalitarianism.

This paper will follow three paths to try to understand the mentors' perspective. The first is a discussion of the current vacuum in instructional leadership that has necessitated innovations such as mentor teacher and other teacher leader plans. The second path is a discussion of the social realities of schools (Lieberman & Miller, 1978) that have encouraged--even caused teacher egalitarianism. The third path stops at the intersection of the first two paths, where the innovation of mentor teacher programs meets teacher egalitarianism. This third path follows the mentors themselves, as they gamely try to face what Bird called the "mentors' dilemma." He defined this dilemma as the challenge of establishing themselves as leaders, and being accepted as leaders in a profession that has neither traditions nor structures that allow for teacher leaders (Bird, 1986).

I. THE VACUUM OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND THE CREATION OF MENTOR TEACHER PROGRAMS

Beginning in 1983 with A Nation at Risk, and followed soon after by the Carnegie Report, A Nation Prepared (1985), and then by the Holmes Group Report in 1986, educational reformers came to the strong realization that American public schools were performing extremely poorly. When researchers and reformers tried to assign blame for the problem, they found that virtually no one was in charge of the instructional programs in many schools. Principals and other administrators were increasingly bogged down in demanding but essential bureaucratic and community chores. It also became clear that administrators no longer had the expertise to exercise instructional leadership over the increasingly varied and complex curricular mandates that schools must fulfill.

Curriculum expertise resided almost exclusively with experienced teachers. So it seemed obvious to the reformers, commissioners and legislators that what was needed were programs in which teachers could share their expertise with other teachers, and could train the many new teachers anticipated in the near future. Quickly statewide mentor teacher programs were set up in Utah, Connecticut, and in California, as well as similar programs in many other districts nationwide.

It seemed to be a fairly simple and sensible solution to the problem--pay the experienced teachers an extra stipend for going into other teachers classes, or for inviting teachers into their classes in order to share instructional knowledge. Unfortunately, what the legislators did not take into account was what Lieberman and Miller (1978) called the "social realities of schools"--the stringent, albeit unwritten rules of teacher privacy--which have created formidable barriers to the successful implementation of mentor programs--especially with tenured teachers.

The California Mentor Teacher Program, as it was legislated through SB813 in 1983, provided mentors a yearly stipend of $4,000, and a $2,000 expense account that mentors could spend on substitute teachers and supplies. This very generous expenditure represents California's single most expensive programatic commitment to teacher staff development. (Little, Gerritz, Stern, Gutherie, Krist & Marsh 1987))

Mentors were defined as "exemplary teachers" with substantial recent classroom experience. The legislation specified that mentors were to spend 60% of their time in their own classrooms and 40% acting as mentors--although no provision was made for how districts were to pay for the 40% out-of-classroom time. (This was to become a major obstacle for mentors because it meant that mentors taught 100% in their own classrooms, and conducted mentoring activities for other teachers outside of classrooms. With no specified paid schoolday time for mentoring, teachers remained isolated from each other, and chances for instructional reform were minimal.)

Mentors were to work "in a staff development capacity with new teachers, other career teachers, and teacher trainees" (Wagner, 1985). However, specific details about mentor duties and mentor authority were purposely not spelled out, in order to "accommodate local needs and conditions" (Bird, 1985).

This seemingly beneficent plan contained many other hidden problems. An particularly important problem was created by its name, "Mentor" rather than "Lead" or "Master" teacher. Although any title conveying differentiation of status among egalitarian teachers would be problematic, "Mentor" was especially confusing. A mentor is usually thought of as a trusted and beloved friend, as well as a counselor and guide. Mentor teachers surely could act as guides or counselors, but the $4,000 stipend left little doubt

that mentors are not performing acts of love or friendship. The term "Mentor" implies less authority than "Master" or "Lead" teacher. This ambiguity of the mentors' authority confused the mentors as well as the teachers, and compromised their success.

Other problems inherent in the California Mentor Teacher Program were the inevitable questions about the fairness of the selection of mentors; the undetermined tenure that mentors were expected to serve--especially when it can take several years for many mentors to become effective; the inadequate number of mentors--a maximum of 5% of the teachers was expected to make a significant difference with the remaining 95%; the provision that districts could implement the program without regard to teachers' wishes; and the ease with which funding for the program could be withdrawn. (The California Mentor Teacher Program was cancelled in June, 1991 because of budget shortfalls, but was reinstated in January 1992 through the extremely urgent insistence of the Los Angeles School District which had become completely dependent on the mentors to train its 2000 new teachers.)

In summary, the complexities of modern American public schools have resulted in a vacuum of instructional leadership because most principals neither have the time nor the expertise to fulfill that function. Reformers and legislators have established teacher-leader or mentor programs to fill that vacuum because teachers were the only ones around with curricular expertise. These programs, although well-intentioned and financially generous to teachers, had many inherent problems, especially when they intersected with the problematic social mores of the schools. These problems have compromised the mentors' chances for successfully fulfilling the reformers' and legislators' intentions for instructional reform.

II. THE SOCIAL REALITIES OF SCHOOLS AND TEACHER EGALITARINAISM

Teacher egalitarianism, so problematical to the success of teacher leaders, has resulted from three workplace factors inherent in schools as they are currently structured: teacher isolation, the mores and taboos surrounding teacher help-seeking and help-giving, and the mixed blessings of teacher autonomy. These factors have contributed to a negative and destructive form of teacher egaltarianism that mitigates against productive teacher interaction.

A. Cellular Schools and Teacher Isolation

Schools are physically and temporally configured so that each teacher is closed into a separate classroom during the entire school workday--in what Dreeban (1973) termed the "cellular" structure of schools. This structure, similar to that of prisons, hospitals or asylums, isolates teachers from each other. As teaching has become more and more complex, and as students' needs, previously met by families, churches and other social agencies, present teachers with increasingly overwhelming challenges, the resources of the solitary teacher are sorely tested.

Isolated practice by teachers has a long history and is what most students have observed in their own teachers (Lortie, 1975). When students grow up and become teachers, they expect to be able to control their classes alone. When problems arise in classrooms, the norms of teacher individualism and self-reliance (Lortie, 1975) that prevail in most schools mediate against teachers asking for help--even when teaching problems are extreme. In spite of lip service to innumerable teacher collaboration schemes in the past Teacher 20 years, teacher privacy persists with fierce tenacity (Little, 1989). Teacher isolation is the first building block of teacher egalitarianism.

B. Help-Seeking and Help-Giving

In cellular schools, both formal and informal rules of behavior have evolved that govern what is considered acceptable interaction between teachers (Lieberman & Miller, 1978). These rules include a strong taboo against entering another teacher's classroom uninvited, and of offering unasked-for advice (Lortie, 1975).

New teachers have little experience in asking clearly for help, and when they do ask, overburdened teachers may not recognize these veiled indirect requests as pleas for help. Feeling rebuffed, the new teachers soon learn that asking for help is not the way things are done in schools (Walley & Stokes, 1981). They retreat behind their own closed doors and work out their problems as best they can alone. It is with new teachers that mentor teacher programs can have the most success, providing help and support before the doors have been closed. New teachers, however, are only a small proportion of the teaching cohort. Most of today's public school teachers have been socialized to be intensely individualistic and private (Lortie, 1975, Lieberman & Miller, 1978).

Both help-giving and help-seeking are fraught with high personal costs to teachers' self-esteem and status within the school community. These costs have been described (Smylie, 1989) as the cost of inequity or indebtedness for help received; the cost of reactance--which implies that when a teacher asks for help, s/he makes a certain commitment to changing behavior as a result of that help; the cost of implied evaluation by others because of the deficiencies that motivate help-seeking; and finally the cost to self-esteem in admitting a need for help. Because of these high personal costs, teachers go to great lengths to avoid asking for help. "Reinventing the wheel" by each teacher is a usual practice

in cellular schools.

Eventually, isolated teachers who have little or no professional contact with their colleagues come to believe that "no professional expertise is available to them in their schools" (Glidewell, Tucker & Cox, 1983). This belief directly challenges the credibility and expertise of mentor teachers, or other teachers who try to affect changes in their colleagues.

Because cellular schools have almost no mechanisms or traditions that allow for help-seeking or help-giving, teachers retreat behind their closed doors and find their own solitary solutions--accompanied by nagging doubts. "Did I find the right solution? Am I doing it right? What would I do if the others see me teaching wrongly?" Isolated teachers who never see others teach, and who never talk openly and in-depth about their teaching practices have little confidence in their own competence, but are afraid to open their doors to observers because they might be "found out" (Lieberman & Miller, 1978). Because they fear that their solitary solutions may not be acceptable, they guard their privacy rigorously.

Observation by mentor teachers could threaten exposure of those shaky solitarily-arrived-at solutions. Teachers using these defensive problem-solving strategies usually fall back on the most conservative and traditional practices--teaching the way they were taught, even at the expense of their youthful idealism and determination to do things differently. Although this closed attitude protects teachers against exposure of their failures, it also prevents them from sharing their successes (Lieberman & Miller, 1978). Teachers generally choose the safety of privacy over the risk of having to justify their long-established practices.

The norms and taboos that govern help-seeking and help-giving

are the second building block of teacher egalitarianism. Teacher leaders must understand and combat these norms before they even get into another teacher's classroom, let alone affect changes or improvements.

C. Teacher Autonomy: Blessing or Curse?

Teacher autonomy means that each teacher has the perogative to decide what to teach and how to teach it--albeit within certain clear constraints--limits imposed by state frameworks, the availability of supplies and materials, and the individual talents and capabilities of each teacher to meet the various needs of the students. Full teacher autonomy should be the mark of a truly professional practitioner. In cellular schools, teacher autonomy can be a blessing or a curse to teachers. It is a blessing for teachers who have large repertoires of teaching strategies--enough to meet the varying needs of diverse student populations; a large knowledge of subject matter and of all available curriculum materials; adequate supplies; and good interpersonal and communication skills.

To teachers with serious deficits in any of the above requirements, teacher autonomy can feel like teacher neglect. All new teachers, as well as many experienced teachers need guidance and support in order to become increasingly professional and effective. This support is rarely available from other teachers who obey the norms and taboos governing help-giving, or from overburdened administrators.

Teacher neglect by administrators has been rationalized to look like administrators are doing teachers a favor by not supervising their classes. Administrators, when asked why they so rarely checked the quality of instruction in their schools, replied that they couldn't interfere in the instructional process because that would impinge on teacher autonomy (Meyer & Rowan, 1983).

Teachers also fear that close interaction with other teachers might be interpreted as an incursion into another teacher's autonomy. So, the myth of teacher autonomy--that each teacher can and should decide what and how to teach, regardless of the level of the teacher's ability to do so, is the third building block in teachers' defensive wall of egalitarianism.

D. Egalitatianism: Positive and Negative

Teacher egalitarinaism has been described as the belief that "...all teachers are alike, differing only in length of service, age, grade level or subject matter, rather than function, skill, advanced knowledge, role or responsibility" (Lieberman, Saxl, & Miles, 1988, p. 151).

Egalitarianism usually is assumed to arise from a feeling of camaraderie or from shared ordeals or experiences. Miners or mountain climbers or submarine personnel come to mind as examples of egalitarian workers because all lives are profoundly dependent on the successful cooperation of all members of the crew. If there are problems, they all share the ordeals. Their strong belief in collaboration and interdependence could be termed <u>positive egalitarianism</u>.

On the other hand, teachers, who rarely see each other teach, who rarely collaborate in any meaningful sustained way, and who rarely even discuss common professional concerns, nonetheless, have been characterized as being "controlled by the egalitarian ethic" (Lieberman, et. al. 1989). This strong egalitarianism has been offered as the reason why teachers overwhelmingly oppose career ladder plans, merit pay plans, and other schemes that would differentially reward teachers for reasons other than the traditional ones of advanced educational credits or seniority.

What could be the basis for this strong egalitarianism in teachers who never see each other work, and have few, if any,

shared experiences? I believe that it is based on teachers' commom distrust of colleagues, who might expose what goes on behind those carefully guarded doors. Teachers have only hearsay evidence about how other teachers teach, but they know well enough about some of their own questionable practices. They fear that others will find fault with their teaching, or that they may find deficiencies in others' practice. They neither wish to be exposed, nor do they want to expose a colleague. So it is safer to take the egalitarian stand--that what goes on in one classroom is probably pretty much the same as what goes on in another.

A stance against teacher equality would imply that some teachers are better than others. If some are better, then those who are worse would have to be exposed and remediated. It is at this point--the point of threatened exposure--that the norms and taboos against teachers entering other classrooms uninvited or proffering unasked-for advice become irrationally defended.

Even good teachers, if they have never had feedback from other teachers, fear the possibility of embarrassing exposure. Exposure of deficiencies logically implies remediation. Some teachers seriously doubt whether they have the energy or the ability to change their habitual practices. This doubt is what Smylie (1989) referred to as the cost of reactance.

Teacher egalitarianism, based on distrust of colleagues and fear of exposure--not on camaraderie, interdependence and shared ordeal--can be termed <u>negative egalitarianism</u>. Negatively egalitarian teachers strongly oppose the idea of teacher leadership for two very potent reasons. First, having never seen other teachers teach, they doubt other teachers' expertise and qualifications as leaders (Glidewell, et.al., 1983). But second, and more importantly, teacher leaders with access to their classrooms represent the threat of exposure.

Teachers have opposed establishing teacher leaders by calling them a threat to teacher autonomy. Both the concept of teacher autonomy, which in its positive form means real professionalism, and the concept of teacher egalitarianism, which in its positive form means teacher collaboration and shared experiences, have been distorted to disguise the defensive norms and practices that isolated teachers have adopted in cellular schools.

III. THE MENTORS' PERSPECTIVE

The mentors were the mechanism designated by the lawmakers to bring about the improvement of instruction in the schools. But as just described, the cellular structure of schools that isolates teachers and results in negative egalitarianism creates strong barriers that inhibit teachers from interacting productively with each other.

Before embarking on the mentors' stories, an important condition must be noted. Because of the isolation experienced by all teachers, mentors themselves are largely unaware of the negative egalitarianism of their colleages and the difficulties this tacit characteristic could create. It must also be remembered that terms such as "egalitarianism," "teacher autonomy," and even "teacher isolation" are researchers' terms. Teachers' perspectives in cellular schools, rarely go much beyond their own classroom doors.

This study closely followed a group of 17 California mentor teachers in all their mentor activities for one school year, 1989-1990. Information for this paper was adapted from a doctoral study conducted at UC Berkeley, Graduate School of Education (Lemberger, 1991). Although several data sources were used for the study, this paper will include only the interviews because the mentors' own words can best convey their perspective. This deliberate focus

does not allow for details of the effectiveness of the mentors or an evaluation of the program.

During this particular year, all 17 mentors just happened to be women who had been teaching from five to 34 years. Four were kindergarten teachers, two 1st grade teachers, four taught in the 4th through 6th grades, five junior high school teachers, and two were high school teachers. Because the district population was fairly stable, there were few new teachers to train. All district teachers were asked to fill out a needs assessment, and mentors were selected on the basis of projects that addressed teachers' staff development needs. Two mentor projects focused on helping teachers learn computers, four on curriculum writing and distributing, but the vast majority of mentors proposed to assist teachers and give after-school workshops in specific curricular areas.

The open-ended interviews dealt with questions concerning the mentors' motivations in applying, their perception of the mentor role, in-classroom interactions between mentors and teachers, the problems and obstacles mentors encountered, and the mentors' perception of teachers' acceptance of the mentor program.

A. Motivation

Mentors expressed four general motivations for applying for mentorships: reward and recognition, altruism, professional development, and response to administrators. Examples follow.

> Reward and Recognition: "Whether I have a mentorship or not, I'm always doing extra things. At least now I'm getting paid for it." (Winnie, 3rd year mentor)
>
> Altruism: "I applied because there were so many things administrators should have done with teachers that weren't being done. Teachers were feeling frustrated because of this." (Ruth, 2nd year mentor)
>
> Professional Development: "I applied so I would be forced to really study the curriculum. When I give workshops

to other teachers, I want to look like I really know my stuff." (Peggy, 1rst year mentor)

Response to administrators: "My principal approached me and told me about her idea for this program, and encouraged me to apply for a mentorship so we could implement her program." (Frances, 1st year mentor)

Conspicuous by its absence was the motivation to lead teachers. This is consistent with the findings of McLaughlin and Yee (1988) who questioned teachers about leadership roles and found that most teachers did not see becoming teacher leaders as part of their career projections. Instead, they defined their own professional growth as attaining greater classroom effectiveness.

B. Role Definition.

When the mentors answered the question, "What kinds of things do you think mentors should do?" their replies gave clues into their understanding of their unaccustomed role. There were many disparities between what the mentors said mentors should do and the things that they actually did. It is here that the contradictions of being a mentor, with all the trappings of a leader (i.e. title, stipend, expense account, etc.) encountered the realities of egalitarianism. The 17 mentors offered 78 replies to the question of role definition.

In order to discern the meaning of those various replies about the mentor roles, I had to devise a definition of teacher leadership that differentiated the degrees of assertiveness or needed to perform those roles. Three elements make up this definition. The first element is the mentor's willingness and ability to <u>exert expertise and authority</u> over colleagues. The second is the mentor's willingness to interact with colleagues <u>inside the classroom</u>. The third element is the mentor's commitment to interactions with colleagues of adequate <u>intensity and duration</u> to bring about change. Mentor assertiveness can be differentiated

into three levels--strong, moderate, and weak.

Strongly assertive mentors actively exerted their authority, imparted their expertise and interacted with colleagues in classrooms repeatedly and intensively enough to initiate and, plausibly, to accomplish teacher change. For example, replies that discuss peer coaching other teachers in classrooms by visiting several times to ensure that teachers had internalized new practices were considered strongly assertive.

> I do units with teachers on a shared basis. We alternate teaching lessons. I start teaching a lesson while they watch me, then they do one while I watch them, etc.--on a five-week cycle. So ten lessons are taught. This is the only way to get a complex teaching strategy off the ground. And it really works. (Marlene, 3rd year mentor)

Marlene was able to accomplish this strong and effective form of mentoring because she was a resource teacher which gave her unusually easy access to teachers. But only 23 of the 78 replies offered by the mentors contained all three elements of strong assertiveness, an indication of mentors' reticence.

Thirteen mentors described their role in a way that looked moderately assertive. Moderately assertive mentors expended special efforts that required expertise, but their interactions with teachers were usually not in classrooms, and were of short duration, making it less likely that teacher change would result. An example of a moderately assertive mentor role is:

> I give a whole lot of lab exercises to my colleagues. Then I say, "Choose which one you want to do. This one is good. I've tried it and it's all set up for you." I pre-set up all those lab exercises on a cart and all they have to do is wheel them in their room. (Elizabeth, 2nd year mentor)

But 42 of the 78 replies mentors gave clearly described weak roles. Weakly assertive mentors did not take a more elevated role than that of their colleagues. They wrote curriculum, or performed

a facilitating, co-equal role. A reply that explains this kind of weak leadership follows.

> Mentors have to accommodate people as much as possible. We need to make adjustments and do what's practical and what makes sense. (Frances, 1st year mentor)

Such an overwhelming number of mentor replies (65 of 78 replies) that did not define the mentor role as exercising authority over colleagues, in classrooms, for a significant period of time, indicated confusion and misunderstanding of the mentor role. The mentors insisted on the weaker facilitating roles, perhaps because they feared challenging the egalitarian mores in the schools.

C. Mentor as Threat.

Although none of the questions the mentors were asked contained the word "threat," mentors used the term often enough to prompt a computer word search of the interview transcripts. "Threat," as used by the mentors had several manifestations: fear by mentors of being perceived as knowing more than their colleagues, fear of challenging long cherished teaching practices, fear of improperly invading another teacher's classroom, fear of looking like a show-off in front of colleagues. Not only did the mentors volunteer stories about their fear of being a threat, they also offered many strategies that helped them lessen the possible appearance of threat. It seemed clear to me as a researcher that the mentors were describing the contradictions mentor teachers faced in trying to be leaders with egalitarian teachers.

> Teachers are comfortable with me coming in during my release (regularly scheduled preparation) time. It's only 50 minutes, but I don't stay in any one class very long. I'm not there that long, so they don't mind. But if I said I'm coming for half a day, that would be more <u>threatening</u>. By my doing it this way, I am not a <u>threat</u> to anybody. (Frieda, 3rd year mentor)

> But if it's a new topic (computers) and there are new

> things for them to learn, then I'm not threatening what they're already doing. This is in addition to what they are doing so they are not threatened. I'm not breaking down anything that they've already learned...It's a non-threatening situation. I'm not taking anything away from them. I'm not challenging anything they're already comfortable doing. I think that teachers who are set in their ways doing something they've done for 20 years, don't want someone coming in saying, "Hey, this isn't it." (Peggy, 1st year mentor)

If Peggy's statement represents the norm of mentors' thinking, is it any wonder that mentor teachers have been less that successful in bringing about major educational improvements? Another mentor offered strategies that lessened the appearance of being more knowledgeable than her colleagues. She deliberately adopted an egalitarian, sharing stance in order not to appear threatening.

> I like demonstrating instead of doing it by talking. Talking is like you're bragging. Doing it by showing is sharing, and that is different. Looking like you're leading makes other teacher think you think you're better than them. (Elizabeth, 2nd year mentor)

Ruth explained under what conditions she, as a mentor, would cross another teacher's threshold. Her statement reflected her deep respect for teacher privacy and her adherence to the norms of teacher autonomy.

> I have to have a very good reason to enter another teacher's classroom!! I would say, "Is there anything I can do to help you? Do you need another pair of hands?" Or maybe I'd drop off some promised materials. But a mentor must present herself as having more reason to come in than just to find out what's going on!! (Ruth, 2nd year mentor)

The statement that follow expresses a mentor's fear of being perceived as threatening to the teachers at their own sites. It illustrates mentors' fear of jealousy or criticism from their own colleagues and the appearance of unequal status.

> "I don't enjoy giving workshops for my own staff. It's the worst thing to do. It feels threatening for an on-site person to give a workshop because they (the other teachers in the audience) all know what's really going on...If you go off-site, they are all receptive and don't say, "She's next door, and I hate her for doing that." (being able to give the workshop)...If it's a peer, on-site, it's a very different feeling. It's much more threatening." (Amy, 2nd year mentor)

D. Mentors Observing Teachers.

Because mentors found mentoring fraught with "threat," opening up teachers' closely guarded doors--certainly an implied feature of mentor programs--seemed almost impossible to accomplish. The mentors were asked, "Have you visited other teachers classrooms or invited teachers to visit yours?" Of the 17 mentors, only six said they actually observed teachers in classrooms for more that just a few minutes. Ten mentors described "popping in for just a few minutes," or seeing what's happening as they pass an open doorway from the hall, as their primary method of observing other teachers teaching.

In probing further, an unexpected ambivalence about direct observation of teaching surfaced from Barbara, who did in fact visit many classrooms.

> If someone came up to me and said, "I'm giving you a free day. Go look around in other classrooms." I'd probably say, "I don't know if I want to. (Barbara, 3rd year mentor)

Teachers are so accustomed to privacy and solitary problem-solving that they are unaware that observing other practitioners could be a potentially rich source of professional information and practical strategies.

Other mentors expressed, with considerable intensity, their discomfort in being observed.

> I don't like drop-ins!! I don't want people coming into my class!!. No one walks into my class to just "look"!!! (Ruth, 2nd year mentor)

> I don't want anyone to observe me. I always get the feeling that everybody else's class is calm, is working well, better than mine. (Brenda, 2nd year mentor)

Finally, Cynthia, who was one of the six mentors who regularly visited other teachers' classrooms, expressed her feeling of powerlessness in challenging the closed-door situation that exists with many teachers.

> I know some of those teachers. I've known them for 20 years!! I'm not about to walk into their classrooms, and they're not about to ask me or anyone else to come in!! (Cynthia, 2nd year mentor)

One wonders what it is that must be protected so vigilantly behind those carefully guarded doors. Whatever it is, it seems clear that mentor teachers, even mentors such as Cynthia who are committed to teacher visitations, cannot singlehandedly affect instructional change in schools as they are presently structured.

E. Mentor Problems.

Mentors were asked, "What problems or obstacles have you encountered in your mentorship?" The 17 mentors were very ready to discuss their difficulties, and offered 90 replies. Mentor problems were classified into three major categories: problems they attributed to their own shortcomings and personal failures (38 replies); problems they attributed to teacher intransigence, resistence or defensiveness (19 replies); and organizational

problems (33 replies) such as poor substitutes, lack of time, and lack of access to teachers.

1. Self-Attributed Problems

Two mentor statements illustrate the extreme discomfort and painful self-confrontation they experienced in trying to fulfill their mentorships.

> Right now, my biggest obstacle is myself! Trying to get the feel of the staff--and then taking the risk! I guess maybe I got burned so many times last year!! I'm thinking, "Well, I've got the class pretty well settled. Now is the time to get mentor things officially started." (long sad pause) It's just me--getting up the courage--or maybe getting off my butt and saying, "Okay, now is the time to move into formal support groups!" (Brenda, 2nd year mentor)

> What comes up for me is the thought of going back to C. (where she had given a workshop presentation on Self-Esteem) What if I'm rejected? What if nobody wants to do it?--if nobody raise their hand? Rejection is so scary. I want to learn to work better with my colleagues and not worry so much about whether everybody will like me. I have a real problem with that. (Jenny, 1st year mentor)

> When I observed her, I thought, "I hate being a mentor to this woman!" There were some things that really upset me!! (Florence, 1st year mentor)

Certainly many kinds of leadership positions can be uncomfortable for the leaders, but the intensity of the pain expressed in the above statements can hardly be contributory to educational improvement.

2. Teacher-Attributed Problems: Intransigence.

Some of the most vehement and explicitly articulated responses from the mentors concerned problems they attributed to teacher intransigence and teacher resistance to mentors' efforts.

> We're supposed to go in there and help teachers, but a lot of them don't want to be helped! They want to close their doors. They are afraid to get help--or they are afraid of exposing themselves, or whatever...Teachers have a system; they have their own way, and that's the way they do it! Only a few teachers are willing to open their doors to new ideas. This may sound ageist, but the younger teachers are more open to new ideas. (Barbara, 3rd year mentor)

After making the above statement, Barbara spoke very sadly, trying both to explain and understand the phemomenon she had just described.

> Some people just lock you out! I don't know where that comes from or what it's about. But it's very hurtful. I don't know if it is personal or professional.

Marlene illustrated her perception of teacher intransigence and her feeling of hopelessness in making a dent in that intransigence.

> Marlene: I've poured a lot of energy over the past years into people who didn't ask for help. I know now for real, from deep inside me, that they really don't care. They don't want to know and they're not going to do it!
>
> Dorothy: Even if it's shown to them that it works well and makes their life easier?
>
> Marlene: No! It doesn't make their lives easier! <u>Not changing makes their life easier</u>!! You can't say that explaining what's behind Math operations makes the teacher's life easier. It doesn't!! It teaches the kids better, but <u>dittos</u> make the teacher's life easier!

Several mentors characterized the problem of teacher resistance as one of "Two Kinds of Teachers."

> It's hard to help experienced teachers. It seems they come in two types--people who basically don't want help. They go to workshops for strange reasons. Perhaps somebody told them they had to, or something. Then there are the people who are involved in their teaching in a

positive way. They ask for specific kinds of help. These people are a joy to help. (Marlene, 3rd year mentor)

The thing is, you have two kinds of teachers here--competent teachers who don't need help, and then you have teachers who need help, but just "don't get it!" It's not worth it...They don't "get" the help when you give it to them. I mean, they are just dumb! No matter how much you work with them they don't "get" it! They really don't want help from me, and are very threatened by me...I visit good teachers, but I don't visit those who aren't that good. They don't want it. Unless I'm invited, there's nothing to be gained. (Martha, 2nd year mentor)

3. Organizationally-attributed Problems

Mentors cited problems from having no set time in their teaching day to mentor, and the difficulties created by leaving their classes with substitutes as obstacles to successful mentoring.

This substitute business is one of the biggest obstacles. Once I called for a sub a week in advance. I worked two hours preparing the lesson plans. Early in the morning, I went to the school across town to do a demonstration for a teacher who had requested help. At 9:00, just when I was getting started, the school secretary came in and said my principal wanted be back at my own school because no sub had shown up!! That really made me mad!! (Cynthia, 2nd year mentor)

A substitute in the classroom is a mini-disaster! It helps if the sub is good, but even so, a sub is something you have to clean up after. (Marlene, 3rd year mentor)

Many mentors were extremely disturbed by the conflicting demands on their time and energy from their own students and from their mentoring obligations.

I'm still locked into my teaching. I put the classroom first--which leaves me little energy to pursue the mentor thing. It sucks me dry some days. (Cora, 2nd year mentor)

> I find it difficult to leave the classroom to go do things for other people. I should have gone to help one new teacher, but I didn't do it. I'm teaching a new grade assignment this year, and I told her I needed the time for my own sense of equilibrium. (Winnie, 3rd year mentor)

In summary, the mentors' perspective of their problems revealed that more than a third of their responses (38 out of 90) attributed problems to their own failings and shortcomings. This high incidence of self-blame indicates that mentoring in an egalitarian profession is fraught with self-confrontation, doubt, pain and even guilt. Nineteen mentor replies placed the blame for problems on teachers' intransigence, resistence to mentor help, or teachers' lack of ability to "get it." Blaming teachers might be seen as a way for mentors to rationalize their failure to accomplish anticipated change.

Mentors mostly personalized their problems, blaming themselves or other teachers (57 out of 90 responses) rather than blaming the cellular schools, the ambiguity of mentors' authority or the implicit egalitarianism of teachers. The remaining 33 replies did address these organizational difficulties (i.e. lack of time, poor substitutes, and lack of access to teachers) mentors faced. Marlene explained it like this:

> It certainly takes a long time to be an effective mentor, but the way it's set up, it's <u>stacked against you</u> in that we have to do it in addition to our regular job. It really tends to burn you out. (Marlene, 3rd year mentor)

F. Program Acceptance.

Mentors were asked, "How is the mentor program being accepted in your school?" In directing the mentors' attention away from their own experiences, I hoped to discern their more general view of mentoring. Mentors reported both positive and negative perceptions of the program. Their negative replies were not unexpected. Mentors mentioned teachers being jealous of mentors.

While Florence denied personally experiencing this jealousy, she acknowledged that she had heard a lot of talk about it.

> One danger of being a mentor is the perception that somehow you think you are "better than---" or that you "know more than--." But that's what other people lay on us. I don't feel the jealousy, but I know it happens. (Florence, 1st year mentor)

Other negative perceptions concern teacher skepticism about the value of the mentor projects. This skepticism echoes Hart's (1989) finding in her study of the Utah Career Ladder Program, that teachers accept teacher leaders' differentiated status and pay only if it is clear that their efforts are, in fact, helping teachers be more effective with students.

> A lot of people think the Mentor Teacher Program is just a lot of bull___! In the past, not all the mentor proposals were fulfilled, so there's still a lot of skepticism about what goes on. We really need to be sure we get good people. (Jenny, 1st year mentor)

> Most people don't take it (the Mentor Program) very seriously. If mentors do good work, they are honored. If not, they are laughed at and people say, "That stupid Mentor Program!! They are paying that person $4,000 for that nonsense?? (Amy, 2nd year mentor)

Also present were stories hinting at unfairness in the selection process.

> Mentors here are looked on as really knowledgeable, but there are many other teachers just as knowledgeable. That's a problem. (Elizabeth, 2nd year mentor)

It is apparent from this fairly wide range of negative perceptions, that the mentor program has less than total support, even from the mentors themselves. When speaking positively about the mentor program, many mentors characterized it as a voluntary, co-equal program, but hardly an instrument of quick educational reform.

> Most people see the program as non-threatening. Mentors aren't trying to take their jobs away. Mentors are seen

> less as someone who has come in to look at me, and more as someone with something to share. Teachers feel they can take or leave what mentors have to offer. (Barbara, 3rd year mentor)

> Mentor activities are voluntary--not imposed from above. You feel like a grown-up, making your own choices. (Florence, 1st year mentor)

Finally, Cynthia articulated that if mentors were more widely used by teachers, teachers' fears could be lessened.

> I think that if teachers used the Mentor Program more, they'd all be a lot happier with that they already know--and then would be able to see more clearly what they need to learn. I see the Mentor Teacher Program changing our attitudes about how we operate. It reduces the pressure. I try to show them that they probably already know a lot of what I have to teach them. (Cynthia , 2nd year mentor)

Cynthia's statement represents the promise of what a successful mentor program could accomplish. When she talked about "reducing the pressure," perhaps she meant the pressures of solitary practice and the fear of exposure. Conditions that encourage successful mentoring could open the classroom doors, and through productive teacher interaction, bring educational reform.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this paper has described in some detail the pain of being a mentor teacher, I wish to state very strongly that I believe mentor programs or other teacher leader programs should definitely continue and are the best hope for real instructional reform and for professionalizing teachers. Six mentors in this study proved to be strongly assertive and were clear evidence that mentors can positively affect instruction. But six out of 17 is certainly not good enough, especially when the quite high cost of the mentor program is considered. The implications of this study are that changes need to be made so mentors have a much better

chance of succeeding.

If the purpose of this study was to inform policymakers and future mentors of the mentors' perspective, what have they told us? The clearest message is that mentors find the mantle of leadership confusing, uncomfortable, even painful. Few saw themselves as leaders but rather as sharers or "co-equals," and then were baffled when teachers resisted their mentoring efforts. Although mentors described teachers as "democratic" rather than "egalitarian", (see Marlene's statement, page 2) still mentors expressed their implicit adherence to the taboos and mores egalitarian teachers had established to guard against exposure.

Two thirds of the mentor teachers defined their roles as only weakly or moderately assertive. They were unable or unwilling to interact with teachers authoritatively, in classrooms, and with sufficient intensity or duration to plausibly bring about change. Many mentors, like other isolated teachers, had had no experience observing other teachers, had never been observed by other teachers, and furthermore, were unaware of the potential professional benefits that open doors and teacher observations could provide.

Mentors told of elaborate strategies they devised to prevent "threatening" other teachers. "Threatening" actions included looking like you know more than other teachers, trying to change teacher's long-cherished practices, visiting another classroom without a very good reason or staying too long. (All of these actions could be described as obligations of effective teacher leaders, but mentors saw them as "threats.") In describing their mentoring problems, they revealed the pain and discomfort they experienced as mentors, overwhelmingly blaming themselves for the problems. These "exemplary teachers" had now become failed mentors.

When mentors did not blame themselves, they blamed the teachers for their resistance, for intransigence, for being too dumb to ever "get" it. Few mentors could see that many of the problems they encountered were caused by the isolating structure of the schools and the faulty structure of the mentor program.

Although mentor teachers have the expertise to bring about improved instruction, and they have had some success especially with new teachers, mentors have not yet fulfilled policymakers' intentions of serving as a powerful mechanism for educational change and reform. Changes to improve mentor success need to be made by policymakers, by administrators and teachers, and by the mentors themselves.

A. Proposed Policy Changes

If policymakers envisioned that mentor teachers would effectively bring about educational reform, legislation must be clarified so this can happen. Two changes would make a huge difference. The first is very simple. Change the name of the program from "Mentor" to "Master" or "Lead Teacher". This simple change would immediately send a clearer message that the master or lead teacher is someone with expertise, and would abate the ambiguity of authority created by the term "Mentor." The second change needed is for the legislation to specify and pay for a regular time period that mentors are to be out of the classroom. Without this provision, mentors will continue to give one-shot after school workshops or write unread curriculum guides. Only with a regular time for mentoring, and a regular arrangement so mentors don't have to worry about leaving their classes to "subs that have to be cleaned up after," will mentor teachers breach those closed doors, and feel free to regularly interact in classrooms with teachers.

B. Proposed School Changes

In schools, administrators could do much to help teacher leaders succeed. In filling the vacuum of instructional leadership, teacher leaders perform a vitally needed service--one that in the past, it was assumed, was filled by administrators. Principals can view this shift either with appreciation and relief, or as an encroachment of their power. Effective teacher leaders must in fact share power with administrators to the mutual benefit of all. There seems little alternative to this power sharing because of the increasing complexities of school administration. Administrators can also pave the way for teacher leaders to be accepted by other teachers by endorsing their activities and cooperating in arranging times and places for teachers leaders to work with teachers.

B. Proposed Mentor/Teacher Leader Changes

Teacher leaders need to understand that they in fact must fill the vacuum of instructional leaders, and must arrive at a definition of teacher leadership that does not offend their egalitarian sensibilities. They need to realize that being a teacher leader is not synonymous with being a tyrant. Teacher leaders are uniquely equipped to perform vitally needed services for teachers. They needn't abandon their humane, diplomatic qualities, but rather should incorporate them into an effective leadership style.

Teacher leaders need to learn how to work with adults, and how to sympathetically break down the defenses that isolated teachers have erected. They need to recognize and understand those tacit forces that have made mentor/teacher interactions so fraught with "threat." The "threat" must be faced and named. If the "threat" is teachers' fear of exposure, understanding teacher leaders can make progress by helping teachers recognize what they already do

well, and then build on their strengths. Teacher leaders need to find creative ways to help teachers open their doors and their minds. Just as teachers can not "give up" on their students, so teacher leaders need patience and perseverance with teachers. Teacher leaders need to view teachers as learners who deserve what all learners require--adequate time for instruction, time for practice, supportive feedback, and time for internalization.

Lastly, teachers and teacher leaders need to become well aware that observing other teachers can be a powerful source of professional enlightenment, and a singularly effective method of increasing teaching repertoires. Teacher observational exchanges, perhaps even required by principals, could open those doors and begin to make classroom problems common concerns with all the resources of the school working to solve them. Mentors could arrange and facilitate these exchanges and the discussions that follow, but teachers must be willing to open their doors and begin to make public what happens in their classrooms.

The cruel traditions that persist in schools of stringent teacher self-reliance, of solitary problem-solving, of teacher isolation, and the taboos against help-seeking and help-receiving must give way. I believe that traditions can change, teaching can become more professional, and that schools can improve. Effective teacher leaders represent an important key to those changes.

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